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STATE OF THE PARKS

Guest Editorial by **Elizabeth Goldstein**
General Manager, Recreation and Park Department

I would like to take this opportunity to review the state of San Francisco's parks and to reflect on this year of incredible highs and lows.

I think it is fair to say that this has been an objectively terrible year. September 11th literally rocked all of our worlds. Since then, the precipitous decline of the state and the nation's economy has had a profound effect on all of us.

The economic downturn has also had a very deleterious effect on the Department, significantly reducing revenues that the Department relies on to operate from places like Coit Tower, the Japanese Tea Garden and the Department's four parking garages. In mid-fall, the City's revenues looked so bad that the Mayor's Office took the prudent step of asking Departments to reduce spending significantly. As a result, the Recreation and Park Department has taken \$3.5 million in reductions in our general fund allocations this fiscal year.

Meanwhile, young African American men have been dying at completely unacceptable rates in Bayview Hunters Point and the OMI; young people in the Mission live with the terrible invisible barriers of turf wars; and, we have young Asian men in the Sunset who feel so outside the mainstream that vandalizing public property has become a recreational activity.

From our social environment to our physical one, we have major problems looming. Our urban forest has terrible and fatal diseases that are circling ever closer, luckily not quite touching down in San Francisco yet. Water levels in the Westside Basin Aquifer continue to decline, threatening Lake Merced and Pine Lake. Much of this news has in one way or another spurred us as a city and as a Department into action. Some of that action, though it seems small in comparison to the challenges we face, is key to building solutions to these problems.

When I met with Mayor Brown shortly after September 11th, his question to me was not whether we could slow spending on the Capital Program but how to speed it up. This work not only provides new and improved facilities for all of us but also pushes badly needed money back into the economy. We have 24 projects breaking ground in the next year and 18 projects slated for completion, with a total of 87 projects actively in process. These projects include park and playground renovations such as Rochambeau, Aptos and Holly Park, new artificial turf soccer fields at Franklin and Youngblood Coleman, major recreation center renovations such as Eureka Valley, Joe Lee Recreation Center, Minnie and Lovie Ward Recreation Center and Chinese Recreation Center. Mission Pool will be completed this summer and North Beach Pool will begin construction in the fall of this year.

New play structures are going in at South Sunset, Joe Lee, Garfield and Crocker Amazon to name four of nine projects underway. The Department's first 'green' clubhouse will be at Visitacion Valley. New parks are being added in some neighborhoods sorely lacking in green space: in the Mission

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Precita Park
at the turn of
the century.



PHOTO: SAN FRANCISCO LIBRARY HISTORY CENTER

Precita Park

When the Board of Supervisors considered making a slice of Precita Place into a park in 1894, "Supervisor Denman opposed the measure, which brought Supervisor James to his feet. . . He called attention to the fact that Denman's ward was plentifully supplied with public pleasure grounds of such extent and character as made them expensive to keep up, but nevertheless, he was putting himself on record as opposing giving another portion of the city anything of the kind" (San Francisco Chronicle). Against that argument the measure passed, and two acres of Precita Place became Bernal Park. It was named for the family of Juan Francisco Bernal who owned the 4000 acres of Rincon de las Salinas which included Bernal Heights. In 1973, the Recreation and Park Commission formally changed the park's name to what it had been called for many years: Precita Park. Source: San Francisco Library History Center.

Located on Precita Avenue, the park cuts a narrow green swath that stretches from Folsom to Alabama Streets. Its heavily-used playground was down to three pieces of worn-out equipment in 1969 when a park bond was passed in November of that year which allocated \$69,000 to improve it. In a meeting with Recreation and Park's general manager, neighborhood children stated they wanted "a swing that goes around, a big slide, and a mountain for kids" (San Francisco Chronicle). With or without the mountain, the kids flocked back to the park after its renovation in 1969.

Their energies never wore out but the facilities did. In the early '90s, a group of concerned and activist residents formed Precita Valley (PV) Neighbors and brought together other community groups whose input and support were key in developing the Precita Park Renovation Plan. PV Neighbors campaigned for and won a \$347,000 allocation from the Open Space Fund, \$186,000 for the playground and \$161,000 for other improvements in the park.

Work on the playground began in April, 1993 and despite troubling delays, was almost complete on opening day in October, 1993. Almost. The swings were missing. Disappointment and outrage from kids and parents, the press story, the blame game and a contractor's fine were finally followed by delivery of the missing pieces.

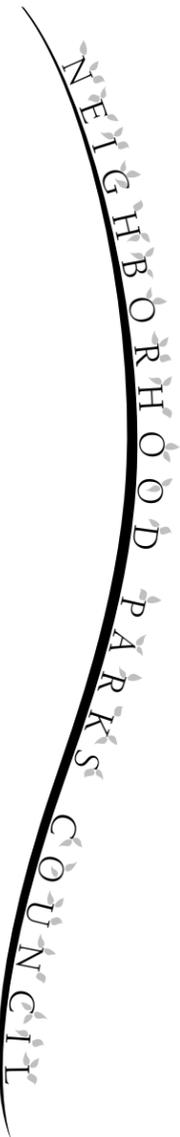
Part two of the renovation of Precita Park included adding a garden, an ADA walkway connecting the park's East and West ends, antique lighting and trees. A lengthy controversy over the removal of some of the black acacia trees, found to be diseased, resulted in protests, postponement, meetings and finally, compromise on those trees to be removed and those to remain.

The garden greets visitors entering the park at Folsom Street. In late fall, PV Neighbors and friends carpeted the garden slope with 600 daffodils, joining the Neighborhood Parks Council's city-wide memorial plantings in remembrance of September 11th victims. Following this, PV Neighbors celebrated the opening of the butterfly garden in late April this year. A collaboration between Community Gardens for Butterflies and PV Neighbors, the project was funded by Friends of Rec and Park and Bernal Hill Realty.

Another long-awaited collaboration, the park's memorial bench, was dedicated in early May. Also funded by Friends of Rec and Park, it was conceived as a memorial to the teenagers Sylvia Menendez and Carlos Hernandez who were killed in the park in 1997. The bench was built from cedar and melted guns by Peaceful Streets' John Ricker who turns the metal from melted guns into artwork. It rests on a dove-shaped, painted tile walkway designed and produced by Susan Cervantes and her staff at Precita Eyes Mural Arts. Composed of 900 tiles relating to the couple's lives, the tiles were hand painted by people of every age from every part of the community.

PV Neighbors see their commitment to park improvement as a help in preserving the community's quality of life, and two awards this year recognize their achievement. The Trust for Public Land gave Precita Park a Lackmann-Soulages Park and Open Space Stewardship Award, and in the presentation of a Beautification Award, San Francisco Beautiful wrote "Precita Park was transformed from a scary place to a great spot to play, picnic and people watch."

—Jeanne Alexander, Neighborhood Parks Council



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UPDATES

Budget Balancing Act Raids the Open Space Fund

In what has become an all-too-familiar pattern of chopping Rec and Park's budget more than other City services in times of crisis, the Mayor's Budget for FY 2002-2003 proposes more than a 20% cut for the Department. Other city department's averaged 8 to 10% cuts.

Even more egregious, the Mayor's budget proposed to siphon off \$1.4 million of the Parks, Recreation and Open Space Fund intended to revitalize the City's ailing parks and acquire open spaces, all in an effort to bolster the sagging general fund. A similar fate is proposed for the Children's Fund, another source of funding that contributes to the Department's recreation programs for children.

Both the Children's Fund and the Open Space Fund were passed by voters under the understanding that the funds would provide benefits beyond the general fund, not as a source of balancing the City's budget in a crisis.

The Open Space Fund is being used as a way to retain positions which otherwise would be cut as part of attrition savings required by the Mayor. Positions funded by the Open Space Fund must, however, work on capital projects in parks previously acquired or renovated through Open Space funded projects. The Parks, Recreation and Open Space Advisory Committee (PROSAC) has asked the Department for a list of specific parks and projects that these staff will be assigned to, as well as the number of hours per week they will be working in specific locations.

Coleman Advocates for Youth and the **Neighborhood Parks Council** joined forces on June 19th in a rally/press conference on the steps of City Hall to protest the use of the special funds and to urge the Board of Supervisors to restore Rec and Park's budget.

Parks Caucus

Thanks to everyone for helping to make Neighborhood Parks Council's fourth annual Parks Caucus on Saturday, June 8th a tremendous success. Over 150 park advocates and local elected officials attended to hear Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá, Colombia speak on the importance of parks and open space.

Those in attendance included: General Manager RPD, **Elizabeth Goldstein**, The Honorable **Susan Leal**; **Clay Harrell** of Assemblywoman **Carol Migden's** office; **Larry Massen** of Assemblyman **Kevin Shelly's** office; Supervisor and future Assemblyman **Mark Leno**; Supervisors **Tom Ammiano**, **Chris Daly**, **Aaron Peskin** and **Matt Gonzalez**; **Mohammed Nuru**, Director of DPW; **Ed Lee**, General Manager, DPW; and **Alex Tourk**, Director of Community Relations, 49ers.

Nature in the City

The Neighborhood Parks Council's "Nature In The City" summer program series is here! Our first walk, "When Dinosaurs Ruled—Glen Canyon Geology Walking Tour" took place in Glen Canyon Park on June 29th. To receive updated information about the overall program, please contact Jesse Stemmler at jstemmler@sfneighborhoodparks.org. Stay tuned for this summer's exciting line-up of additional tours.

Leaving a Lake Legacy Seminar

An audience of sixty was on hand at an NPC seminar in May to learn about the state of San Francisco's three remaining fresh water lakes: Lake Merced, Pine Lake and Mountain Lake. Organized by NPC hydrologist Katie Pilat and funded by the GAIA Fund, the illuminating speakers included Dr. Alex Horne, University of California Berkeley; Dylan Hayes, Friends of Stern Grove / Pine Lake Park; John Plummer, Friends of Lake Merced; Katie Pilat, NPC's Hydrology Project; Brian Hildebidle, Golden Gate National Parks Association; Craig Lichty, Presidio Recycled Water Project and Carole Schemmerling, Urban Creeks Council. Minutes are available from NPC.

Cayuga Park Update

In June, Cayuga Park's wonderful gardener, Demie Bracerros, had an accident and cut his hand badly with a chainsaw. Let's all send Demie our prayers for a speedy recovery.

In the meantime, we can help by picking up litter so the park won't look neglected and invite thieves. It doesn't take much time to go down there with a garbage bag and gloves and pick up papers, cans, etc. . . . all efforts would be most appreciated. For those of you who aren't familiar with this beautiful jewel of a park, it's located at Cayuga Ave. between Lamartine and Danton.

Growing Greener School Grounds Conference

Teachers, parents and community members, join District Park Planning efforts! Come get your hands dirty while learning useful and practical techniques for building, using and maintaining green schoolyards in your community. The two-day conference features: hands-on workshops at local schools and presentations from leaders in the outdoor learning environment. **Save the Dates: October 25th (evening) and 26th (all day)**. For more information, check out www.sfgreenschools.org.

Doggie Do's and Don'ts

In a unanimous decision, the Recreation and Park Commission adopted the revised Dog Policy on May 8th. The revised policy calls for fencing around dog areas in parks smaller than 10 acres and for dog areas in those parks to be at least 10,000 square feet. In parks between 10 and 35 acres in size, 30,000 square foot areas (possibly unfenced) will be required for dogs. Much larger (unfenced) non-leash areas will be created in the city's biggest parks, including McLaren Park, Stern Grove and Golden Gate Park.

Enforcement of the revised policy will take effect after a 90-day "public education" period which started on May 8th. During the 90-day period, signage will be placed in parks and an 11-member Advisory Committee will be created. A link to the complete dog policy is provided below: <http://www.parks.sfgov.org/Dog%20Policy/Table%20of%20Contents-New.htm>

—Amber Rosenberg

SAVE THE DATE!

The Neighborhood Parks Council is planning our first-ever dinner fundraising event/silent auction to take place on October 1st, 2002 (full event details to follow). In the meantime, if you'd like to donate any auction items or serve on a committee to hustle auction items, please contact Sarah Low, (415) 621-3260. Your support is greatly appreciated, especially in this time of shrinking budgets!

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State of the Parks . . . continued

at 23rd and Treat (under construction) and Hoff Street which just had its conceptual plan approved by the Commission. Other new park acquisitions this year include Hawk Hill, Esprit and Ferry Parks.

Some regional park projects have also begun to pick up steam. At McLaren Park, we are in construction on the restoration of McNab Lake. At Lake Merced, a major new agreement on the conservation and replenishment of water has been reached. Harding and Fleming Golf Courses at that park are under construction and a fishing pier will be reconstructed in the fall of this year. Stern Grove and Pine Lake are well on their way to renovation with a very exciting improvement plan. This plan represents a fabulous opportunity for the City because the Stern Grove Festival Association has donated the services of world-renowned landscape architect Lawrence Halprin to the City. Work continues on major and beloved landmarks like the Conservatory of Flowers and the Palace of Fine Arts. In addition, we are edging ever closer to a master plan for the controversial Marina.

We have also been trying to rise to the challenges confronting the City through our recreational programming. Some of that work has been quite traditional but with a twist such as sending our young athletes to the US Youth Games last summer, kids in six sports went to Birmingham to represent San Francisco. Seven teams will go to Newark this year and next summer we will host the games here in San Francisco.

Some programs are more twist than tradition. We have partnered with a program called Pedal Power that teaches children in the Bayview how to repair bikes, as well as with a new radio station for teens that will start up at Gilman Park this summer. We taught carpentry skills to kids in the Sunset through volunteer labor that our skilled Department craftsmen provided.

And we partnered with the Mayor's Office of Criminal Justice and the YMCA to create a new Safe Haven program at Oceanview Recreation Center for the most at-risk youth in the neighborhood. Midnight Music, a new program targeted at kids, started this past winter with four Saturday sessions featuring music variety shows at Mission, Richmond, SOMA and Milton Meyer Rec Centers. This program has now joined forces with Park Sessions, a teen-initiated program originally launched by the Neighborhood Parks Council, and will continue with 11 Friday night music sessions for teens at Glen Park Rec Center this summer.

Speaking of partnering, we have been working with some of our fellow agencies and non-profit partners better than ever before, including: DPW's Clean City, Strybing Arboretum and DPW's Green Program, and the Neighborhood Parks Council's District Park Planning Program. This latter program has helped the Department to do better community outreach and our joint budget hearings had a tremendous turnout this year thanks to NPC's efforts.

In-house, this has also been an important year for operational improvements. We are working more efficiently at the Departmental level. We have improved our computer infrastructure to create field efficiencies for the staff. We are in the midst of operational planning to look at the deployment of staff to create equity and efficiency. We provided customer service training for 700 employees and offered a customer service orientation for employees for the first time in many years.

And no summary of the state of recreation and parks would be complete without at least brief comments on dogs and natural areas. It has been a very difficult year because the Citywide Dog Policy has caused so much controversy, but now that the policy is in place, I feel that it is crucial to convey how important it is to the Department. I believe that all of us will put our shoulders to the wheel and put the new policy to the test. There is no other way to assess its viability. We have dedicated staff and resources to implementation; we hope that everyone will set aside their preconceptions on all

continued next panel

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sides and try and make thoughtful park by park decisions about how the policy hits the ground.

In regards to the Natural Areas program, I hope folks will also keep it in perspective. The program is only a small part of our department. It has nine gardeners, a \$600,000 budget and will always remain a small part of a large number of vital park services that the Department provides such as forestry, volunteer programs, etc. Whatever the many differences are over this program, I hope that we can all remember that we are fundamentally committed to the same goals in the end. To quote from the Department's proposed new mission:

The mission of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department is to: foster the well-being of our diverse community by maintaining beautiful parks, preserving the environment, and providing enriching recreational activities.

Thank You.

THANK YOU

Theresa & Richard Alvarez	Francesca & Mark Hertsgaard
Mel Baker	William Johnson
Alvin H. Baum	Dorothy Ann Jones
Joseph Brown & Jacinta McCann	The Stanley S. Langendorf Foundation
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